

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO  
PHILOSOPHY

THE PERENNIAL PRINCIPLES  
OF THE CLASSICAL REALIST TRADITION

*By*

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*Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.*

PLATO, *Theaetetus*, 155

*It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at the first began to philosophize.*

ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, I, 2.

## CHAPTER 1

### WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

UNTIL late in the history of our race the reason of man tended to be under the sway of his senses and imagination and the accounts given to explain the universe took for the most part the form of myth and legend. The Greeks alone among the peoples of antiquity succeeded in recognizing the difference between a purely rational explanation of things as distinct from mythical, poetical, or religious explanations. Those among them who displayed great gifts in the intelligent manipulation of the forces of nature and in tracing out the reasons for things were called wise men.

The earliest meaning of wisdom is very broad and refers to the cultivation of learning in general. "The word *sophia* covered all we mean by science and a good deal more besides, such as the art of making pontoons and guessing riddles."<sup>1</sup> With the passage of time, however, it became apparent that not all kinds of explanation were the same. The inquiry into what a thing is, for example, was seen to be different from the inquiry into how to do something. Particular fields of investigation, too, came to be separated out into special, self-contained branches of study such as geometry, physics, biology. The term wisdom ultimately was reserved for the study of things in their deepest and most general aspects: speculation about the fundamental reality of things, where things come from, why there is anything, and similar questions.

<sup>1</sup> J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy from Thales to Plato* (London: Black, 1948), p. 11.

### THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM PHILOSOPHER

The word "philosopher" is traced back to Pythagoras, a famed sage who founded a community of scholars in southern Italy in the sixth century before Christ. Pythagoras is supposed to have disclaimed the title "sophist," or wise man, for the reason that "no man, but only God, is wise." Since the goal of perfect wisdom is beyond the attainment of mortal man, it is more fitting that one who searches after wisdom be called a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, rather than a wise man. Later men of learning also emphasized the disparity between true wisdom and human wisdom: "Only God is really wise," said Socrates at his trial. Not until the time of Aristotle, though, does the term philosophy take on a technical meaning, setting it off as a special branch of learning distinct from other kinds of investigation.

To understand what philosophy is in the strict, technical sense requires a knowledge of philosophy. It is impossible, therefore, to start with a definition of philosophy in the strict sense which will have much meaning for one who is just beginning his study of philosophy. For the present we will content ourselves with the most general description of what philosophy is, leaving the formulation of a precise definition to the end of our work after we have examined just what philosophy does.

### THE MEANING OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE WIDE SENSE

The numerous schools of philosophy that have arisen have offered many different explanations of what philosophy is. Most of them agree, though, that it is concerned with the broad view of things. Where the scientific specialist concerns himself with a single feature of reality — the astronomer, for example, with the study of the heavenly bodies — the philosopher seeks to view the whole of reality in a single comprehensive glance, to organize all aspects of reality into a unified world view. "All sciences tend to generalize, to reduce multitudes of particular facts to single general laws. Philosophy carries this process to the highest limit. It generalizes to the utmost. It seeks to view the entire universe in the light of

the fewest possible principles, in the light, if possible, of a single ultimate principle."<sup>2</sup>

A second point on which nearly all philosophers are agreed is that philosophy must be distinguished from revealed religion, from supernatural wisdom, which also gives man a unified, comprehensive view of reality. Whereas religious beliefs are based on the truthfulness of a God who reveals, the principles of philosophy rest on a purely rational foundation.

Besides the disinterested inquiry into the nature of things, the use of philosophy in the wide sense usually covers also the order of practical wisdom — particularly the shrewd ordering of one's daily life. This is the sense of philosophy which persists in expressions such as "armchair philosopher" and "cracker-barrel sage."

In the light of these considerations we can give a tentative, descriptive definition of philosophy — philosophy taken in the wide, popular sense — as a superior kind of knowledge, "a sort of higher curiosity," whereby we endeavor to dig down to the very roots of things and through the exercise of reason try to find out why we hold our basic, most fundamental convictions about the nature of reality.

Philosophy is not, however, found embalmed in definitions. It is found in living men, and the best place to study it is in the philosophers themselves. For this reason we shall begin our study by retracing the footsteps of some of the first philosophers. In doing so we shall at the same time ourselves be learning to philosophize. First, however, let us inquire why we should philosophize at all.

### WHY STUDY PHILOSOPHY?

One of the earliest answers to this question can again be traced back to Pythagoras, who held that philosophy seeks knowledge simply for its own sake, apart from any question of gain or usefulness. He compared the community of man to the great crowds who used to come from all parts of Greece to celebrate the Olympic games. Some men come to compete and win prizes and honors.

<sup>2</sup> W. T. A. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1920), p. 3.

These are like the politicians and soldiers who compete for honors from the community. Others come to buy and sell, setting up booths to provide for the needs of the crowd. These are like the merchants and tradesmen who spend their lives in the pursuit of gain. Still others, and they are the most favored of all, come simply as onlookers to see and enjoy the spectacle, seeking neither applause nor profit. This is the role of the philosopher in the community of men. "And as at games it is most befitting a free man to be a spectator seeking nothing for himself, so in life contemplation and understanding far surpass all other ambitions."<sup>3</sup>

Philosophy can be compared to the fine arts in that like them it has an intrinsic value and importance. We listen to music, read poetry, attend the theater, study paintings and statues because these things are enjoyable for their own sakes and not necessarily for the sake of anything else. Similarly, men philosophize not for purely practical ends but simply because it brings them pleasure. Anyone who has enjoyed working out a scientific experiment or solving a difficult problem in geometry has experienced the fact that knowledge brings pleasure. And this joy that knowledge brings is its own justification.

The arts and philosophy are of such great worth precisely because they are not to be used but to be loved and enjoyed just for themselves. For it is the exercise of his higher powers of knowing and loving that separates man from the lower animals. To the degree, then, that human beings devote themselves to the disinterested enjoyment of the arts and the pursuit of knowledge, to the degree that they are not tied down to the useful, they and their culture ripen into what is most distinctively human.

#### ALL MEN PHILOSOPHIZE

In the wide sense in which we have used the word philosophy, all men philosophize, whether they know it or not. Our most commonplace expressions of optimism or pessimism, selfishness or high-mindedness, idealism or cynicism, carry along with them unacknowledged assumptions about the nature of the universe as a

<sup>3</sup> See Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, V, 3.

whole and man's place in it. "The most practical and important thing about a man," says G. K. Chesterton, "is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them."<sup>4</sup>

A philosophy none the less real because it is unrecognized is hidden in the words we speak and write, in our newspapers, in our motion pictures. A philosophy of one kind or another, some implied way of life, is embodied in works of art, in painting, music, dancing, in political institutions and social customs, in all sorts of unsuspected places.

The choice before us, then, is not between accepting or rejecting philosophy, since each of us — whether he knows it or not — already has one, but between holding it consciously or unconsciously. Unless we free our minds by becoming critically conscious of what we hold unconsciously and uncritically, we are liable to become victims of our own unconsciously held philosophy or of the philosophy of others, which may rule us all the more tyrannically because it is hidden and operates in the dark. What we hold implicitly, vaguely, confusedly, must be rendered explicit, definite, and clear in the light of reason and the evidence of things. For in the words of Socrates, one of the greatest of all philosophers, "The unexamined life is not worth living."<sup>5</sup>

#### SUMMARY

The beginnings of philosophy are traced back to the sages of early Greece who were the first men on record to appreciate the

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 38. All quotations from Plato are taken from the translation of Benjamin Jowett as found in *The Dialogues of Plato* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1920). The references to the works of Plato are based on an edition of the Greek text which appeared in Paris in 1578. Almost all modern editions keep the page numbers and marginal letters of this edition.

requirements of a purely rational explanation of reality. The term philosophy, the love of wisdom, came into use with the recognition that the wisdom open to man is at best partial and limited. Philosophy is used in both a broad, loose sense and a narrow, precise sense. The examination of the exact definition of philosophy is postponed until we have some acquaintance with what philosophy has meant in practice. In the broad sense we can say that it is the search for ultimates, conducted by reason alone, in order to satisfy man's curiosity about himself and the universe of which he is a part.

NOTE: A useful complement to the beginner's first studies in philosophy is the reading of some history of philosophy. A select list of these as well as a list of other *Introductions to Philosophy* will be found in the Reading List at the end of the volume.

## PART I *The Historical Rise of Philosophy*